# New York Theatre · Critics' Reviews 1945

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## 1945 PRODUCTIONS

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
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## 1945 PRODUCTIONS

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### THEATRE OPENINGS

Next Half Hour (The)
Beggars Are Coming to Town

***Complete reviews appear in this issue***

# "The Next Half Hour"

PM

OCTOBER 30, 1945

—Kronenberger—

## *Bad News for 'Harvey' Fans*

*PM Reviews*

In *The Next Half Hour*, the author of *Harvey* has emphatically not pulled another rabbit out of her typewriter. Indeed—to be blunt—she has this time written a play whose good things are infrequent and incidental, and whose weaknesses are ultimately crushing. It finds Mrs. Chase in a generally serious mood, but even more in a garrulous and sentimental one. Despite George Kaufman's valiant efforts to pace *The Next Half Hour* and perk it up, it becomes an exhausting evening.

Mrs. Chase is writing of an Irish-American family of a generation ago, and particularly of a devout and mystical mother who can foretell disaster and who hears a banshee wailing just before death strikes. Aware that a new tragedy is approaching, she feels sure it will overtake her unruly 19-year-old son Pat, who has been carrying on with a married slut; and hoping to avert calamity, she goes with the truth to the slut's husband, pleading Pat's youth. Just afterwards her bachelor brother dies—which seems, to her relief, to account for the banshee's wailing. But she has sent her younger son, the apple of her eye, with a message to the slut; and mistaking him for Pat, the husband kills him.

* * *

The burden of the play, at least in the superstitious view of the mother herself, is that one cannot try to play God, but must leave things in God's own hands. It is an old theme, and Mrs. Chase has brought nothing new to it. Indeed, she has not even caught the old simple atmosphere that could often make such a theme telling. The main line, the prevailing mood, of her play seems to me, not folkish or mystical, but just uncommonly sentimental. And the very end, when the mother reacts to the tragic news, is the worst possible kind of old-fashioned maudlin theater.

What doubles the failure of *The Next Half Hour*, however, is that Mrs. Chase has not simply failed with her story; she has failed equally with her story-telling. The play is the limpest kind of theater, billowing and a. length, just stagnating with talk. (The *action* consists mainly in running up and down steps and in and out of doors; a rather feckless device even for farce). The unending talk smothers, indeed, whatever suspense resides in the plot. Some of it is good talk enough, humorous and flavorsome; some of it has fun at the expense of the much-more-Irish-than-American older generation of the family, the two bachelor uncles and the mean old aunt. But the likeable writing in *The Next Half Hour* is spread awfully thin; and it cannot in the least sold up against so much that is long-winded, undramatic, sentimental and, at bottom, imaginatively commonplace.

* * *

Mr. Kaufman's direction is for the most part above reproach, but hasn't a chance of carrying the day. Fay Bainter plays the mother with a certain force of character, but with little subtlety or variety; she makes the part perceptible, but not very interesting. Art Smith and Francis Compton make a nice pair of old bachelors, and Jean Adair makes the mean old aunt into a Real Character Part. Jack Ruth is acceptable as the older son, and Conrad Janis unusually good as the younger one. As the slut, Thelma Schnee achieves a maximum of twisting, mincing and grimacing—here, I think, Mr. Kaufman needed to give a tug at the reins.

It was something, at any rate, to go once more to an opening at the Empire, though Life With Father, there, was a good deal more exhilarating than Death With Mother.

—LOUIS KRONENBERGER

**'THE NEXT HALF HOUR.'**

Play by Mary Chase; staging by George S. Kaufman; setting designed by Edward Gilbert; costumes by Mary Percy Schenck; presented by Max Gordon at the Empire Theater Monday evening, October 29, 1945. The cast:

| | |
|---|---|
| Barney Brennan | Conrad Janis |
| Margaret Brennan | Fay Bainter |
| Pat Brennan | Jack Ruth |
| Frances Brennan | Pamela Rivers |
| Peter O'Neill | Francis Compton |
| James O'Neill | Art Smith |
| Rosie Higgins | Esther Owen |
| Jessie Shoemaker | Thelma Schnee |
| Bridget O'Neill | Jean Adair |
| McCracken | Larry Oliver |

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The Sun

OCTOBER 30, 1945

## Mary Chase's 'The Next Half Hour,' Done at Empire, Gloomy and Exhausting.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

The woman from out Denver way who gave Broadway a tall white rabbit and thereby brightened a theatrical season turns to the folk lore of Ireland and the wailing of the banshees in "The Next Half Hour," which reopened the Empire last evening. Fay Bainter is the star, George S. Kaufman the director, Max Gordon the producer. Even so, the news is far from good.

Mary Chase's play, apparently written prior to "Harvey," is gloomy, plodding and quite exhausting. Kaufman's directorial skill comes along helpfully throughout the evening, but notwithstanding all that he has done to the play and for it, there are many dreary stretches in "The Next Half Hour." And considerable overacting, too.

Fay Bainter brings all of her resourcefulness to the role of Margaret Brennan, born in County Cork, who is given to superstitions and foreknowledge of doom, but I'm quite puzzled as to why she wanted to play the part and am just a little startled to find Kaufman directing the play and Gordon producing it.

Mrs. Chase is writing of a tragic evening in the home of the Brennans in an unnamed American city in 1913. The Irish-American mother has a premonition of death for a member of the household. She foresees it and the moaning of the banshees tells her that it is certain to strike. Her son Pat has become involved with a married woman on the South Side of the town and Maggie Brennan intervenes to save him from the fate that she has foreseen, and she does. But because of her efforts death comes in another direction, claiming an innocent victim.

"The Next Half Hour" goes its way gropingly. There are certain scenes that come to life, but this fact is to be attributed more to the staging of Kaufman than to the writing of Mrs. Chase. In the play's final moments it gets quite out of the control of all concerned.

Fay Bainter, an actress of many distinguished performances in the local theater, does about all any player could do in the role of the troubled mother, guided by superstitions and prevision. Her performance is frequently a moving one. The influence of the Abbey Theater on several performances of the evening is quite apparent, but to the advantage of only a few of the players. Art Smith and Francis Compton come through with good Old Country characterizations. Jack Ruth makes a character of the wayward boy whose affair with the town trollop brings tragedy to the Brennans. Conrad Janis is quite affecting as young Barney, who has donned long trousers.

Edward Gilbert has contributed a believable living room and the period costumes of Mary Percy Schenck are first-rate. The Empire is a wonderful theater and last night's audience came wishing Mrs. Chase well. But "The Next Half Hour" is tedious and fumbling—and quite definitely her second best.

DAILY NEWS

OCTOBER 30, 1945

# Fay Bainter is Grand in 'The Next Half Hour,' But the Play Is Not So

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In "The Next Half Hour," which Max Gordon presented at the Empire last night, the splendid work of Fay Bainter, Jean Adair, George S. Kaufman and Mr. Gordon himself is considerably better than the playwriting done by Mary Chase.

The actors, the directors and the producer are putting on a drama as utterly well as they know how to do it; but Mrs. Chase too often is so intent upon the folklore, the superstitions, the traditions and the alternately fey and quarrelsome characteristics of the storybook Irish that she loses track of the rule that a good play should keep moving.

Last night's greatest pleasure was the return to the stage of Miss Bainter after an absence of 10 years. Her portrayal of Margaret Brennan, who can hear banshees and see doom approaching, has in it every bit of the tenderness, the wistfulness, the generosity and the religious trustfulness the author could have wished for. It is creative acting—a thing so rare that we must give thanks whenever we find it.

**Nothing Like "Harvey."**

Mrs. Chase wrote "Harvey." No one should expect—or have the right to expect—another comedy of gentle, friendly lunacy. "The Next Half Hour" has considerable comedy—some of it sharp, some of it pretty close to Pat-and-Mike exercises—but in the main it is a fairly grim tale of the death which comes with the wail of the banshee and the appearance of signs and portents.

Margaret Brennan (Miss Bainter) is the steadying center of an unsteady Irish household in an American city in 1913. Two of her children, Frances and Barney, are nice kids, but the eldest of them, Pat, is wild and lazy.

About the time Margaret learns that Pat has been going around with a married trollop she gets the signs and portents. Death is coming to the household. And when she learns that the trollop's husband is a very tough man she fears that Pat is the one who has been marked—and she tries to sidetrack fate.

**A Surprise Ending.**

Just how she maneuvers should not be related here, for it builds up to an intense ending for the play—and the ending has what they call in Hollywood a surprise twist. Let it be enough to say that Margaret does sidetrack fate . . . but fate strikes somewhere else. Do not, she warns, attempt to sidetrack it. Let it come, for the next half hour belongs to God.

The rest of the Brennan household includes two of Margaret's brothers, gentlemen from County Tyrone who are salty and flavorsome. Visitors include the trollop, who has two emotional scenes which are well written and well played; a ragged old crazy woman and a sister of Margaret's who has a wonderfully sharp tongue. Almost all of them indulge in so much quarreling to fill in time that I had the uneasy feeling I was intruding on a private fight.

Miss Adair, in the character role of the sharp-tongued aunt, is admirable, and her first scene gives the play an immense lift. Art Smith and Francis Compton as the uncles, Thelma Schnee as the trollop, Jack Ruth, Conrad Janis and Pamela Rivers as the children—these all work surely and effectively. George S. Kaufman is one of the two best directors in the theatre.

The 1913 living-room designed by Edward Grant has just the right curio flavor, and so do Mary Percy Schenck's costumes.

New York World-Telegram

OCTOBER 30, 1945

*By Burton Rascoe*

## 'The Next Half Hour' Another Chase Success

Mary Chase must be an unusually nice and understanding woman, plus being a woman of imagination, intelligence and skill in dramatic craftsmanship; for she had turned up at the Empire with a melodrama which has even more substance—though perhaps less theater—than her current hit, "Harvey."

Mrs. Chase, after having explored (with admirable comical effect) the benign influence of what the medicos call chronic alcoholism, which may produce hallucinations in the mind of the alcoholic that he has one true friend in the world, who understands him—a rabbit six feet and one inch in height—has now turned her attention to a common phenomenon among some otherwise admirable women, namely, that they have second-sight, hindsight, feminine intuition and a special dispensation from Providence which enables them to foresee what is going to happen today or tomorrow.

Margaret Brennan (Fay Bainter) learns at the end of "The Next Half Hour" that she has sent her favorite 17-year-old son (Conrad James) to his death because she thinks she knows all the answers and also because she, living in an American city in 1913, is still affected by the Irish pagan superstitions she acquired as a child, from old pipe-smoking crones, in Cork, before she was brought to this country, as an orphan and as a widow with three children, by her two brothers.

**Cry of Banshee.**

The action takes place in a single evening. Miss Bainter thinks she has heard the cry of the banshee, which, in Gaelic superstition, means death. (To the credit of all concerned, no cry of the banshee was heard last night at the Empire.) But Miss Bainter DOES know that one of her sons (Jack Ruth), age 19, has been having an affair with a married woman.

She doesn't like this. She doesn't want any harm to come to her son, because he is a silver-cord child and especially precious to her—although he himself resents and hates the relationship—and so she tries to fix things up by asking the woman involved to give up the boy, and then by asking the husband to show Christian resonableness and charity and not shoot her son.

That was all that was needed for the husband—who, although he never appears on the stage, is depicted by his wife (Thema Schnee) and by an old spinster-in-law (Elizabeth Malone) as a sadistic and murderous brute—to go out and kill the wrong person—the boy who had been sent out by his mother to keep her elder son from keeping a rendezvous with the maniac's wife.

From the first, quiet introduction of the characters, this melodrama is beautifully presented. I thought, sure, at one climactic point that Miss Schnee was going to tell Miss Bainter that she had killed her (Miss Schnee's) husband. Everything pointed that way. But, Miss Chase, the author, is a careful playwright; she works her melodrama up to a surprise ending—and a very sensible and intelligent ending it is!

**Acting Honors.**

In my book, the acting honors for the evening must go to a youngster named Conrad Janis, whom I cannot remember having seen before. He is so real, so natural and so sensitive to what the character he is playing should be. Jean Adair, a veteran, won special applause last night; but her minor part was especially juicy, and she wrung every drop from it, bless her heart!

But there is very imaginative direction, all through, by—(of course, although I had not realized it until just now, when I looked it up in the program)—George S. Kaufman. Mr. Kaufman certainly knows his business, whether as a playwright or a director; and my thanks must go to him for insuring that all the members of the cast whose names appear in the cast box—should do their best by a melodrama that depends more on the way it is played than on the text, even though the text is so carefully written that you could hear a prop drop during the evening last night at the Empire.

Fay Bainter is starred, and she does nicely, even with some of the Grade B movie effects she has learned from Hollywood directors, for three-minute projection before the camera and the mike. And I should like to shake the hand of Mary Percy Schenck for the costumes she has designed, especially for Pamela Rivers, a good little actress. The set, by Edward Gilbert, is admirable, also. The play has warmth, truth and tension.

# "The Next Half Hour"—*continued*

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

OCTOBER 30, 1945

= By HOWARD BARNES =

*Mystical Confusion*

IRISH mysticism becomes even more confusing than usual in "The Next Half Hour." There are moments of revealing insight in this new play by Mary Chase, to whom we are indebted for "Harvey." In a radiant performance by Fay Bainter and several excellent supporting characterizations at the Empire, they are given eloquent interpretation. Unless you are up on your banshees, though, you are likely to lose your way in a maze of symbolism which will get you right into the land of the Shoe if you don't watch out. Tiresias, who stood upon the walls of Troy and trumpeted its ruin, had nothing on Margaret Brennan.

"The Next Half Hour" is chiefly a study of Margaret Brennan, who lived in an American city in the spring of 1913 and thought she could foresee all. After an interminable first act, her visions of disaster start to come true and before the play is over an overly solicitious relative remarks that she is quite all right, though crazed, because she cannot remember today, nor fear for tomorrow. In the interim an irassible immigrant from County Cork has died of a heart attack and the younger brother of a ne'er-do-well sport has been killed by a correctly suspicious husband who merely picked the wrong member of the clan to strangle.

* * *

The fact remains that this Max Gordon production has the stuff of theater which has too rarely been in evidence this season. The scene in which Miss Bainter, making her first stage appearance in some eleven years, talks to the son whom she thinks is safe from an impending doom, is a beautiful piece of writing and construction. So is that in which various members of the Brennan clan foregather in acrimonious sociability. The characters stand up bravely in "The Next Half Hour" and the lines support them more often than not. The general idea of the piece adds up to sheer nonsense.

Obviously, it is Miss Bainter who dominates the acting at the Empire. At the same time there are other players who share honors with her. Conrad Janis is splendid as the youngster who unwittingly takes his brother's place in a homicidal divination. Francis Compton and Art Smith are quaintly ungrammatical as brothers of the Brennan woman, and Jean Adair goes to town as a niggardly old maid aunt, who dispenses her blessing on calamities. George S. Kaufman has staged the work trickly, to keep a minimum of action strfiking, but he hasn't kept the first act from yawning. "The Next Half Hour" has far more substance than meaning.

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**The New York Times**

OCTOBER 30, 1945

## THE PLAY

By LEWIS NICHOLS

Within a few days of the first anniversary of "Harvey's" fabulous arrival, Mary Chase last evening saw her second play reach Broadway. "The Next Half Hour," which Max Gordon set up at the Empire, is an animal of a different breed. Like its predecessor, the new drama deals with the distant worlds of the mind, but there the resemblance ends abruptly. Instead of going in for rabbits six feet, one and one-half inches in stature, Mrs. Chase now is investigating Irish folklore and the wail of the banshee. "Harvey" is a comedy, and "The Next Half Hour" is anything but that; "Harvey" is a gay and pleasant evening in the theatre, the new one is not. Indeed, "The Next Half Hour" is a long and quite tedious piece of business, relieved only intermittently by bursts of good acting.

* * *

Mrs. Chase's central figure is an Irish-American, the date is 1913. The mother of two boys and a daughter, the character also is in contact with voices and she can tell the future. When on the day in question she has found part of the crepe from her husband's funeral, and in addition has turned up the ace of spades, it is apparent that something will happen. When the banshee wails, inaudibly to all save the lady, death is on the way, and since one of the boys has been carrying on with the wife of a night-working railroad man, the finger points pretty steadily in his direction. Since "The Next Half Hour" is basically a melodrama, it would be a dirty—but not necessarily Irish—trick to give Mrs. Chase's story away; sufficient, that the banshee was not joking. The play ends with a solemnity that in the wrong hands would be completely ludicrous, and even as it is lies not far from that.

Mrs. Chase has not the substance for a full play, and in this particular case at least has not the ability to cover lack of the raw material with good atmosphere. Once her stage has been set, her audience waits patiently for something to happen, and it does so very fitfully indeed. In between moments of story are longer moments given over to a form of Celtic comic relief and longer moments still of plain conversational padding. The first act seems interminable. Then, too, as the leading character reviews the omens of misfortune, she seems to be gilding the lily unnecessarily; the banshee and the other hints operate like the ring of an automatic telephone. Finally, Mrs. Chase does not hide the outcome; long before death takes his victim, it is obvious who he is to be—and how. The Irish tell stories with suspense, which Mrs. Chase does not.

The one indubitable asset of "The Next Half Hour" is that it brings Fay Bainter back from distant fields. But the part of Margaret Brennan is an impossible one, and not even Miss Bainter makes a complete success of it. Some of the speeches are so long they necessarily grow monotonous, and Miss Bainter is much more at home with the maternal and family affairs than she is with her voices and omens. Francis Compton and Art Smith are good as a paid of middle-aged Irishmen, and Thelma Schnee usually is right as the wife of the railroad man. Since Mr. Gordon and George S. Kaufman, his director, do things in style, they have Jean Adair as the tart, elderly aunt of the family, and she is fine. Mr. Kaufman keeps things going along as best he can, but the assignment must have been the hardest directorial job in years. Probably "The Next Half Hour" was born within sound of the banshee's voice and thus was doomed from the start.

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**New York Post**

OCTOBER 30, 1945

## 'The Next Half Hour'— Or the Wail of the Banshee

By Wilella Waldorf

Mary Chase, author of "Harvey," has written a long-winded tragedy about the Irish entitled "The Next Half Hour" demonstrating pretty conclusively that it doesn't pay to interfere with fate. Produced last night at the Empire Theatre by Max Gordon, with George S. Kaufman as stage director and Fay Bainter as its star, the play never succeeds in establishing the eerie mood of Celtic fantasy and lyricism at which it so obviously aims.

Mrs. Chase presents as her leading character an Irish-American mother who is not only "fey" but also Fay Bainter. She knows when the banshee wails that death is about to strike, but her advance information about future events is singularly vague. Leaping to all the wrong conclusions, she rushes about trying to change the course of destiny and winds up with a catastrophe on her hands far worse, apparently, than anything fate had contemplated.

A sound enough, if not precisely novel, theme which the author develops elaborately in rather old-fashioned theatrical terms, ranging from distraught melodrama to what amounts to interpolated vaudeville of a mildly amusing nature, interspersed with a great deal of unconvincing chatter about the old country—unconvincing because there is something persistently un-Irish about the actors who do the talking.

Although we really have no great desire to sit through "The Next Half Hour" a second time, it would be interesting, supposing it were possible, to see it produced one day with some Abbey Theatre performers playing the older generation of Irish-Americans now acted at the Empire by Miss Bainter, Art Smith, Francis Compton and Jean Adair. All of these people are good actors, but they don't even begin to get out of Mrs. Chase's play what little there is in it—a certain flair for pat phrasing here and there that might be far more flavorsomely presented than it is.

Conrad Janis, Jack Ruth and Pamela Rivers, representing the younger generation, under no obligation to be anything but exuberantly American, come off rather better, although they, too, are occasionally stiffened up by the artificiality of some of the scenes which even George S. Kaufman, as director, is unable to render anything but slightly maudlin. Thelma Schnee has an opportunity to play a floosey on the verge of hysteria, Miss Bainter has her own Mad Scene that seems almost as long as Lucia's, while Elizabeth Malone is the witchlike Rosie Higgins, who is pathetically batty.

There is, in fact, a good deal of madness in "The Next Half Hour" but it's unmistakably stage madness. Like the play, it all seems synthetic and a little overdone.

Journal American

OCTOBER 30, 1945

# 'The Next Half Hour' Opens at the Empire

By ROBERT GARLAND

A disturbing play is responsible for a distinguished performance at the Empire Theatre. The disturbing play is "The Next Half Hour," by Mary Chase, best known hereabouts for "Harvey." The distinguished performance is that of Fay Bainter, returning magnificently from Hollywood therein. Here in town Miss Bainter's Margaret Brennan is altogether worthy to stand in artistry beside The Mother of Laurette Taylor in "The Glass Menagerie."

Even a professional first-nighter can tell you that "The Next Half Hour" is a better play than "Harvey." Where the play about the rabbit which Elwood Dowd alone can see is fresh and funny, the play about the banshee which Margaret Brennan alone can hear is tragic and terrorful. And this is why "Harvey" will be at the 48th Street Theatre long after "The Next Half Hour" has departed from the Empire.

Even so, the tragic comedy and the comic tragedy have much in common. And each, after its Mary-Chase-ian fashion, is dependent upon the rightness of the player projecting the pivotal personality. Just as I tremble to think what "Harvey" would be without the Elwood Dowd of the Fay whose first name is Frank, I tremble even more to think what "The Next Half Hour" would be without the Margaret Brennan of the Fay whose last name is Bainter.

* * *

## Piece D'Occasion

Once again our Pikes Peak playwright, our Denver dramatist, our Celt from Colorado is involved with the Irish, their folklore, their superstitions. This time her piece d'occasion is no fine and friendly pooka, but a dismal and distant banshee that lifts its voice in wailing whenever death is near. And death is the mental next-door-neighbor of Margaret Brennan, the sad and psychic sister of Harvey's amiably alcoholic boy-friend.

Thanks to her inaudible (to everyone but her) banshee, her all-too-audible (to everyone, including her and last night's congregation) sister and her prophetic playing cards, Margaret Brennan is firmly and fearfully aware that death is coming to her happy American home during the Holy Week of 1913. And come death does, in a manner sudden and unexpected. It comes doubly, striking once, then once again.

In that devout and devoted home is a devout and devoted family, if an exception can be made of the young and handsome Pat who is unprofitably involved with the young and open-hearted Jessie Shoemaker from a less respectable part of town. Jessie is married to a big and burly Mr. S. who loves and lives with her not widely but too well. It is he who, offstage and somewhat arbitrarily, fulfills the banshee's solemn warning and the playwright's tragical intentions.

* * *

## Brava Bainter!

Fay Bainter, who has acted most of this before—in "Dodsworth," say, and "East Is West" and "The Willow Tree"—reacts it to the hilt up on the atmospheric Empire stage. There's one interlude especially, the one with her younger son at the foot of the Brennan stairs, that breaks your heart in two. Nobody, not even Laurette Taylor, could give it more breathless verisimilitude. A great actress, Miss Bainter, one even Hollywood could not harm.

Under the devoted direction of George S. Kaufman, a devoted direction that falters surprisingly at the beginning of the final stanza, the unstarred performers in "The Next Half Hour" are forthright in their individual interpretations, flawless in their teamwork. Only Jean Adair as Bridget O'Neill, beloved of play and playwright, is prone to overact for her audience's amazement. But Bridget is overwritten.

When you get around to sitting in the presence of Mary Chase's tragic comedy at the Empire, take appreciative notice of the Barney of Conrad Janis, the Frances of Pamela Rivers, the Jessie of Thelma Schnee and the carefully detailed background of Edward Gilbert...So here at the end, as there at the beginning, I wholeheartedly report that Mary Chase's is a disturbing play, that Fay Bainter's is a distinguished performance.

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# "Beggars Are Coming to Town"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

OCTOBER 29, 1945

By HOWARD BARNES

*Rags and Tags*

"BEGGARS ARE COMING TO TOWN" toys ineffectually with a good dramatic notion. The new show at the redecorated Forrest Theater, now the Coronet, draws sharp contrast between the "hello sucker" days of the speakeasies and the elegant unction of contemporary cafes. It has vigorous characterizations by Paul Kelly, Luther Adler and several lesser members of the cast. For all of that, the plot follows a devious and tedious course and arrives exactly nowhere. This Oscar Serlin production is neither good social satire nor convincing melodrama.

* * *

Theodore Reeves, with an assist from Mother Goose, has tried to chart the bewilderment of a gangster of the prohibition era, who gets sprung from the penitentiary after fourteen years, to find himself in an alien racket. His former partner is bedeviled by his strong-arm tactics in what has become a genteel and exclusive bistro. Having cheated him, he tries to buy him off, and finally brushes him off. A couple of scenes have amusing and vaguely violent moments, particularly when several torpedoes of rum-running days wander into the proceedings as law-abiding bums. The romance which has been cooked up for what passes as a climax is downright awful.

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The play gets no more aid from Harold Clurman's direction than it does from the script. The principals are forever striking banal poses to instill a bit of meaning and authority in the work. Since most of them know better than to do this, the effect is frequently lamentable. Kelly is generally excellent as the prison-pallor partner who discovers that cafe management has become a matter of corporate dodges rather than fixes and murders while he has been out of circulation. Adler plays the new-style bistro impressario with grim intensity, and Dorothy Comingore has very pretty legs as the cigarette girl who convinces the ex-convict that times have changed.

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There are good bits to elaborate the jingle of the title: "Hark, hark, the dogs do bark; beggars are coming to town." George Mathews, Tom Pedi and Harry M. Cooke contribute incisive characterizations of broken-down killers. Herbert Berghof adds a nice portrayal of a head waiter. None of the acting keeps the show from winding down steadily after a promising start. The Coronet has not had an auspicious inaugural under its new name.

**'BEGGARS ARE COMING TO TOWN.'**

Play by Theodore Reeves; staging by Harold Clurman; production designed and lighted by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Ralph Alswang; presented by Oscar Serlin at the Coronet Theater, Saturday evening, October 27, 1945. The cast:

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|---|---|
| Maurice | Herbert Berghof |
| Feltz | Alfred Linder |
| Emile | Julius Bing |
| Dave | E. G. Marshall |
| Pasqual | Joseph Rosso |
| Neil Turner | Luther Adler |
| Lou | Harry Kadison |
| Frankie Madison | Paul Kelly |
| Florrie Dushaye | Dorothy Comingore |
| Jonathan Webley | Harold Young |
| Mrs. Bennett Richardson | Adrienne Ames |
| Bennett Richardson | Austin Fairman |
| Ziggie | Louis Gilbert |
| Wilson's Waitress | Cedric Wallace Trio |
| Nick Falastra | George Mathews |
| Heinz | Tom Pedi |
| Skinner | Arthur Hunnicutt |
| Goldie | Harry M. Cooke |

PM

OCTOBER 29, 1945

—Kronenberger—

## *A Tale of Two Gangsters*

### *PM Reviews*

What with the old Forrest Theater (now the Coronet) swimming in fresh blue paint and aswarm with madly glittering chandeliers, Saturday night's opening should have been a mildly historic occasion. But Mr. Serlin's new production turns out to be only a dim little event. There's a good enough situation in *Beggars Are Coming to Town* for what might be called nostalgic melodrama, with a gangster of Prohibition days getting out of stir to find that the world has changed considerably and his old partner has changed even more. But having come up with something of an idea, Mr. Reeves has merely fondled it for three acts. Once the situation has emerged, the play falls to pieces in his hands.

Frankie Madison didn't know that while he was up the river taking the rap for both of them, Noll Turner had written him off. Frankie thought they were still partners, and that he now owned half of the swanky supper club that Noll had made a go of. This, and the fact that Frankie is a relic of a departed era of crime, is Mr. Reeves' set-up; and it could plainly be worth something in terms of melodrama, picturesqueness, and even a kind of pathos. But very little comes out of it because Mr. Reeves has neither written a play nor created a chief character.

There is no old-time gangster's blood in Frankie because there is no blood of any kind. Mr. Reeves, I gather, wanted to show Frankie—with his tough talk, his trying to lay it on the line with Noll, his idea that what a supper club needed was not a maitre d'hotel but a mob—as a has-been. But Frankie is neither convincing nor touching; Frankie is sawdust. The spirit of *Broadway* and *The Racket* never passes over into *Beggars Are Coming to Town;* it is as deficient in nostalgia as in excitement.

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For the story comes apart as patently as the hero is never put together. Knowing there had to be a girl in the proceedings, Mr. Reeves conveniently found one right on the premises. The supper club's cigaret girl and Frankie use up the whole second act in a very hackneyed fashion, getting acquainted and falling in love; and when Frankie finally goes into action against Noll, Mr. Reeves is misguided or desperate enough to play his big scene for laughs, and go on to a pretty foolish final curtain. All he manages to salvage from the evening is some entertaining bits about running a night club, and two or three colorful minor characters.

Mr. Clurman's direction is effective in small ways; effective, for example, with the minor characters who give it a chance; but it fails to steer the play into the right mood or to cover up any of its real weaknesses. Paul Kelly goes at the part of Frankie as well as he can; and Luther Adler is properly smooth as Noll. Miss Comingore seems miscast as the cigaret girl, though the part itself is a phony. A number of small roles are well-played, Herbert Berghof's headwaiter having the most authority, and George Mathews' small-time gangster the most life. And Jo Mielziner's set of a supper club "office" seems perfect, at least for stage purposes; having never seen one, I can't say how completely it rings true.

—Louis Kronenberger

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The Sun

OCTOBER 29, 1945

## Serlin's 'Beggars Are Coming to Town' Faltering Night Club Melodrama.

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

The newly named and daintily decorated Coronet Theater was restored to the drama Saturday evening with the presentation of "Beggars Are Coming to Town," a play with an exciting locale and one that begins sharply, but it flounders badly before reaching the halfway mark and is never the melodrama you hoped it could and would be.

Oscar Serlin is the producer of "Beggars Are Coming to Town," which brings memories of New York's fantastic era of the speakeasies. Theodore Reeves wrote it and the atmosphere is all there, and so is the material for a searing play. The ingredients, however, have been used falteringly, the play is lacking in cohesion, and its effective moments come only in occasional flashes.

The author's notion is a good one. He confines all his action to an evening, 6 o'clock to midnight, in the office of a smart supper club, the Avignon. Into this plush-roped establishment he brings an ex-racketeer, just released after fourteen years in prison for a murder rap, and eager to resume partnership with his old prohibition days associate, who has changed his ways and has moved uptown.

The bewildered Frankie Madison discovers that the world has passed him by during the years he has been out of it. The night club industry no longer belongs to a racket of mob rule and truck hijacking but is now a business of books and bookkeeping, stockholders and shareholders, ledgers and graphs, fractions and intricacies of corporations, and dedicated to the maintenance of an exclusive clientele. Frankie, finally convinced that he has come too late, abandons his plan to take over the Avignon at the point of a gun and walks out to the uncertainty of a new life with the cigarette girl.

"Beggars Are Coming to Town" is a melodrama not skillfully developed from its basic situation. It begins promisingly and straggles. There are moments that bring reminders of the famous "Broadway," but these are only echoes of a play that must serve as a model for all pieces in the melodramatic mold that have to do with night life operations. The Coronet's new play is singularly at fault in the love-at-first-sight romance between Frankie, still living in the prohibition era, and the shapely cigarette girl. The scenes they have together are not well written, nor are they particularly well played.

Oscar Serlin has given "Beggars Are Coming to Town" an excellent production. Harold Clurman has provided careful and detailed direction. Jo Mielziner's setting is one of his best, and the acting is generally effective. Paul Kelly, in those moments in which he has gone tough and has decided to seize the joint, is an actor of considerable force. Luther Adler brings suavity and tension to the part of the wily Noll Turner, speakeasy operator of other years who has come along in the world. Dorothy Comingore, making her Broadway debut, is strangely listless, but the role of the cigarette girl is quite an impossible one.

There are good characterizations from Herbert Berghof, playing a headwaiter with an interest in the club; George Mathews, as a gangster quite reluctant to go in for violence; E. G. Marshall, as the unglamorous accountant, forever setting down arithmetic in ledgers, and the lean, nasal, drawling Arthur Hunnicutt, in one of his now familiar portrayals.

"Beggars Are Coming to Town" is strong on atmosphere and short on play. It is of the stuff of good melodrama, but Theodore Reeves just didn't write one.

The New York Times

OCTOBER 29, 1945

## THE PLAY

### *Impoverished*

By LEWIS NICHOLS

The gangsters came back last Saturday evening, not the international ones but those medieval relics of prohibition. Credit Theodore Reeves and his "Beggars Are Coming to Town" for this closing of a cycle, and say further that the years in stir have softened the tough guys into a form of putty. Mr. Reeves puts rods in their hands, and allows them to fall in love with leggy cigarette girls, and that of course is just like the old days.

But something new also has been added, and that something is talk. "Beggars Are Coming to Town" spends the evening wandering around making threats, but when called it does nothing about it at all. Gangsters used to shoot, when the stage was young, and they stood no nonsense from their enemies or playwrights. In this case the enemy and the playwright appear to be one.

Grant the author his basic idea. Back in prohibition there had been two partners, one of whom went to jail for killing a hijacker. His pal worked his way up the ladder of success from dive to plush rope and doorman, and when the convict had served his time, he thought he remained a partner still. This was an illusion.

Noll Turner, as owner of a swank spot, is not dealing out parts of the corporation. Frankie Madison, Sing Sing '45, gets a gun and tries to get a group of "the boys" to help and doesn't realize times have changed and you can't muscle in on things any more. What appears to teach him the sad truth is (a) the love of the cigarette girl and (b) a description of the corporate structure of a modern night club. Love and Moody's Industrials are a tough combine.

A fair amount of "Beggars Are Coming to Town" seems just a little silly for the grown-up, Saturday night theatre. A cozy dinner, during which the ex-convict and the girl discover that feeling, is the type of thing that is heard more often over the radio in the morning than from the stage at night.

Toward the end Mr. Reeves apparently realizes that he has been uttering a good many threats and probably will have to do something fairly soon. His solution is unique, even if it doesn't altogether make sense; the gunman listens while they tell him about stock, ownership and corporations, and obviously no one—save the Justice Department—can shoot a corporation. The better plays do not end with an anti-climax.

Luther Adler makes a real person of the partner who prospered; he has the suavity of the East Fifties and clearly has risen above his prohibition-day dive. Paul Kelly is the ex-con, and until the time Mr. Reeves begins throwing figures at him, he too is reasonable. Dorothy Comingore has the proper build for the cigarette girl, but the syrupy sweetness of the part makes it all but impossible to play. Herbert Berghof is very nice as the club's head waiter, who worries about and defends his percentage in the place, and there are a few other well-played minor roles. Jo Mielziner's setting is excellent and Harold Clurman has tried to add life in the direction. But there just isn't enough for the bother.

Journal and American

OCTOBER 29, 1945

## Melodrama At the Coronet

By ROBERT GARLAND

After a bit of hemming and hawing out-of-town, Oscar Serlin brought "Beggars Are Coming to Town" night before last into the former Forrest Theatre. Cleaned up and draped with silks and satins, the dingy old 49th st. playhouse has become the bright new Coronet. Before the curtain rose on the Theodore Reeves dramatization of one of Mother Goose's familiar melodies, it was as if "Tobacco Road" had never lived there.

But after the curtain had risen on Saturday night's newcomer and Jo Mielziner's handsome office of a New York supper club had been duly applauded, things went slowly but surely from good to mediocre, from mediocre to bad, from bad to worse. What had started out to be a modern melodrama turned out to be an anachronistic hangover from the gone and half-forgotten prohibition era. All it needed was Texas Guinan to cry "Hello, Sucker!"

But that was among the several things it did not have. And could have used advantageously.

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What it did have was a story about Noll Turner, owner of Jo Mielziner's handsome New York supper club, and Frankie Madison, who took the rap for Noll and served his time in Sing Sing. Graduating in the criminal class of 1945, Frankie arrives revengefully on Manhattan, prepared to take his place as Noll's fifty-fifty partner. He does not know that times have changed, that 52d st. has gone legitimate.

Complications ensue, but not many of them. Noll Turner tries to give Frankie Madison the runaround. And Florrie Dushaye along with it. But, somewhere in the second stanza, both the double cross and the cigaret girl get lost and "Beggars Are Coming to Town" concerns itself with a would-be comic interlude in which the books and the bookkeeping of the Avignon assume an on-stage importance which most certainly is not theirs.

In consequence, Oscar Serlin's follow-up of "Life With Father" becomes a good (enough) idea gone wrong.

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Even if I'm in the minority when I insist that Luther Adler's Noll Turner is another bit of Adlerian overacting, that's the way Luther Adler's Noll Turner appears to me. This time, however, he overacts in English rather than in Italian. Paul Kelly's Frankie Madison is a whole lot more believable. It is in me to wonder, however, if such denizens of Sing Sing remain entirely out of touch with the crimes and criminals of the outside world.

Dorothy Comingore has the legs it takes to make a successful cigaret girl. And, come to think of it, that's all the role of Florrie Dushaye demands. Adrienne Ames moves decoratively on and off as Mrs. Bennet Richardson. And, under the collective title of Wilson's Wastrels, the Cedric Wallace Trio makes soft sounds on various instruments. Harold Clurman's direction is negative. Jo Mielziner's background is not...

Night before last somebody remarked that "Beggars Are Coming to Town" was life with bother. Which, bad as it is, gives you some idea.

New York World-Telegram

OCTOBER 29, 1945

### *By Burton Rascoe*

## 'Beggars Are Coming to Town' Full of Sound and Scenic Fury

At the opening on Saturday night of "Beggars Are Coming to Town," by Theodore Reeves, at the Coronet, I was insistently reminded of Tallulah Bankhead's alleged apposite quip during an excessively pretentious production of Maurice Maeterlinck's "The Blue Bird."

Miss Bankhead—after being dazzled and dizzied by the splendiferous sets and lighting, the ethereal costuming and the general air of hallucination which the producing managers were seeking to achieve, and while trying to derive some meaning out of the Belgian's poet's symbolism about Tytyl and Mytyl's discovery that their turtle dove was blue—is said to have turned to her vis-a-vis and confided, "There is less in this than meets the eye."

I haven't the slightest idea what point Mr. Reeves is trying to make in "Beggars Are Coming to Town," unless it is that the speakeasy days are over, that the contemporary night club proprietors have discovered that honesty is the best policy, and that it is sensible to refrain from committing a second murder after you have already served 14 years in Sing Sing on a conviction of manslaughter.

I should think that one did not have to write a drama to explain the wisdom of not courting the hot-seat, as Joe Williams has nicknamed the electrocution chair.

And, besides, in "Beggars Are Coming to Town," this great message to suffering humanity is not written, played or staged like a drama. It is written, played and staged like a Hollywood movie of the vintage of 1928. Jo Mielziner, who designed and lighted the production, with technical advice from Vincent Sardi, the restaurateur, has spared no pains to make the goings-on at the Coronet as much like a movie of the prohibition era as possible.

The show has a number of good actors in it, whose names may be found in the cast box; but, with about one exception — Dorothy Comingore—they are not allowed, either by the text or by Howard Clurman's direction, to be human or natural.

Miss Comingore has the sexiest role any girl has had since they padlocked the burlesque houses. Maybe she can carry this very pretentious drama by her figure and her costume alone. She's worth seeing, even if the show is less so. The music by the Cedric Wallace Trio is very nice and George Mathews, in a bit part, was especially good.